Making democracy in Spain

Grass-roots struggle in the south, 1955–1975

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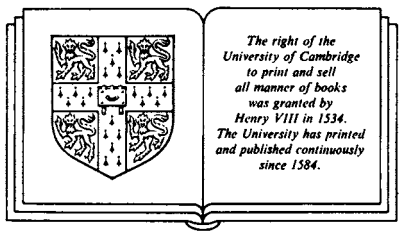

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge
New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011–4211, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa

http://www.cambridge.org

First published 1989
First paperback edition 2002

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
Foweraker, Joe.
Making democracy in Spain: grass-roots struggle in the south,
1955–1975 / Joseph Foweraker.
p. cm.
ISBN 0 521 35406 4
1. Spain – Politics and government – 1939–1975. 2. Trade-unions –
Spain – Political activity – History – 20th century. 3. Political
participation – Spain – History – 20th century. 4. Representative
government and representation – Spain – History – 20th century.
I. Title.
DP270.F65 1989
946.082–dc19 88-39691 CIP

ISBN 0 521 35406 4 hardback
ISBN 0 521 52281 1 paperback

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Introduction

Personal networks, political strategies and the making of democracy

PUTTING THE PEOPLE BACK IN DEMOCRACY

THIS IS A STORY of the making of democracy in Spain. Its main aim is to explain how this came about. Its main preoccupation is with the people who brought it about. So I will tell you of the countless unsung heroes who fought for more than twenty years for their measure of human dignity and personal freedom. In doing so I will search out the beginnings of the struggle at the grass roots of civil society, before pursuing the political and strategic initiatives which shaped the forms of struggle in the years to come. Simple as this may sound, it is an ambitious task. I wish to return this piece of democratic history to the people who made it and to return the study of democracy in general to a Rousseauian concern with its roots in civil society. It is my belief that the ways in which the Spanish people struggled to assert more control over the political conditions of their own social lives were the ways they came to achieve their own citizenship; and that this achievement prepared the political ground for the formal achievement of democracy itself.

In this perspective, the democratic struggle in Spain arose spontaneously from the needs and aspirations of civil society and was an organic expression of that society. Its political demands and political organizations grew out of the process of struggle itself. The one struggle was therefore many struggles in many places for many motives; but each struggle contributed to the often contingent and always piecemeal process of making democracy. Moreover, this process was not a natural result of the individual discontent and political dissent latent in civil society but rather required continual political organization and political calculation; and so the political activity of civil society had to be underpinned by its personal networks and sustained by their discovery of effective political strategies.

I do not pretend that this is the whole story (although it is certainly the least studied and least understood part of the story). On the contrary, my claim that the making of democracy must first be explained at the grass roots of civil society does not seek to deny so much as to complement those

accounts which concentrate exclusively on elite actors and on centrist political forces. Moreover, I readily admit that the political organizations and strategies of the popular opposition to Franco were not able (either alone or in concert with elite actors) to dislodge the regime; and that reformers within the regime consequently came to play an important role in bringing democracy to Spain. In other words, this story is not about the so-called *transition* to democracy in Spain, which covers the few short years of 'elite settlements' and legal-constitutional negotiations immediately before and after the death of the dictator; but rather about the democratic *transformation* of Spanish society during the twenty long years preceding this transition. Hence, my intention is not to contest or confirm extant accounts of the transition per se but to explain the creation of the political conditions in which the transition took place. Nonetheless, I confess my dissatisfaction with studies of democratic transition (whether in southern Europe or Latin America) which limit democratic achievement to changes of regime at government level, or to the legal-constitutional norms governing the operation of the democratic regime.

The emphasis on transformation and not transition is especially important in the case of Spain, where civil war and the terror which was its aftermath had crushed civil society almost completely. In fact, the violent disputes between left and right, which had afflicted Spain (and so many other countries of Europe) during the thirties, reemerged in the new regime as a bitter division between people and State. No form of free association was permitted, and any sign of independent social or political activity in the Spain of the 1940s was ruthlessly suppressed. Moreover, no help was forthcoming from the outside, and, unlike in Western Germany or Italy, democracy was not restored by the military fiat of the victorious Allies. Yet, despite the isolation and the repression, people made sufficient contact and found sufficient political space to begin to organize; and partly because of the isolation and repression they founded sui generis political organizations and discovered original strategies for extending the boundaries of civil society. But most remarkable is that over time, the new (and nearly always illegal) organizations achieved sufficient political penetration and impetus to alter the balance of social forces in Spanish society, and to put democracy back on the historical agenda. In short, there is no doubt that this struggle did contribute significantly to the successful effort to establish democratic rule; and the story of the struggle therefore has a political interest and potential application far beyond the boundaries of Spain itself. But how did people make the contacts or find the space to carry the struggle forward?

In my view there is no way to answer this question without beginning at the beginning, which is at the grass roots of civil society. Democratic possibilities in authoritarian contexts necessarily have to be discovered (sometimes in the most unlikely places) or invented (sometimes from the most unlikely materials), and the only way to capture this process is to observe

specific moments of discovery and invention. This means getting right down to the ground, where 'people' appear as concrete individuals or at least as different social actors with special characteristics. Putting the people back in democracy is therefore a methodological as well as a philosophical choice. But the choice is fraught with difficulty (as much for political scientists in general as for myself). Looking at people *as if* they were individuals [*sic*] makes it impossible to romanticize the making of democracy by invoking the 'people' as some sort of global category (in academically 'demagogic' fashion); but it is equally impossible to look at *all the people* in this way (which is why political scientists like psephologists are content to count them, leaving their characteristics to ethnographers, oral historians and novelists). My response has been to introduce criteria of selection (empirical, analytical and methodological); and each of these criteria has implications for the way the story is told.

First, it is important to recognize that the democratic struggle within Spanish civil society was waged not by all the people equally but by a relatively small group of activists, who were prepared to make their dislike of the dictatorship their life's work. They were not necessarily democratic actors in the sense of cleaving to liberal values, but were unquiet in their hearts, restless in their heads and in revolt against past and present injustice. They grew in numbers as the struggle progressed, but in every locality throughout Spain they were always the small minority of natural leaders who appeared 'when they were needed'. Second, these activists were effective only insofar as they found each other, and as they came together in close and complex relationships, they formed stable personal networks which strengthened incipient political organizations and increased the range of strategic viability. These networks were a key element of the popular opposition to Franco, and analysing the part they played (and the individual choices which entered their composition) also goes some way to operationalizing the struggle of the 'people'. Finally, this is both a *national* study and a *case* study, with the advantage that the entire process of the emergence of a regional leadership in opposition to Franco can be examined in unprecedented depth and detail. Although the case is geographically and socially specific, there is no doubt that in regard to the organizational and strategic aspects of the struggle, it is perfectly well able to serve as a *microcosm* of Spanish civil society overall.

The case in question is that of El Marco de Jerez, the sherry-producing region of Andalucía, which lies between Sevilla and Cádiz in the south of Spain. It is a region with the double presence of a rural and an urban working class, a strong commercial sector, and a successful and united bourgeois oligarchy; and it is a region where the popular leadership which emerged in opposition to Franco conducted one of the most consistent and strategically sophisticated struggles in the whole of Spain. Nonetheless, El Marco is a relatively small region, and I do not wish to suggest that it has anything

like the importance of major population centres like Madrid and Barcelona. This would be plainly absurd. But it has the distinct advantage of being manageable and of allowing the kind of investigation which captures the challenges and the contingencies (see later in the introduction) of democratic struggle. At the same time, the detail I can deliver in talking of El Marco creates a better sense of the difficulties of political organization in necessarily clandestine circumstances, and a better understanding of the political process expressed through personal networks and strategic discoveries.

All these choices (namely, the empirical focus on the natural leaders, the analytical attention to personal networks, the methodological priority to the case study) reflect my preference for simply telling the story. But the story of El Marco would be incomplete, even idiosyncratic, without the contextual significance provided by the political economy of Francoism, and the different regional, class and popular struggles carried on elsewhere in Spain over the period from the 1950s to the 1970s. I do not address all of these (and it would not be useful to do so), but throughout my argument a national account accompanies the local account provided by the case study, with the specific aim of creating a comprehensive (but far from empirically complete) analysis of the struggle within civil society. Even when painting the broader picture, my aim is to re-create the view from the bottom up (or from civil society to the State, if you will), and maintain a consistency between case and nation through concentrating on the analytical themes of organization and strategy. In this way I proceed to tell the story while focusing during its telling on the key issues and categories which will later be systematized into a more conceptual approach to making democracy.

CLASS DIVISIONS AND POPULAR-DEMOCRATIC STRUGGLE

It is apparent in both national account and case study that the popular-democratic struggles of this period were also class struggles; and there is no doubt in my mind that it was the labour movement which sowed the seeds of the democratic struggle, or that this struggle continued to have a clear 'class relevance'. Indeed, one reason for choosing to study El Marco de Jerez was the striking clarity of its class divisions, which sharpened the empirical analysis of the connections between class and popular-democratic struggle. Much of this story, therefore, has to do simultaneously with class actors and democratic struggle; and a central concern is to explain why these actors played such a leading role in the struggle. The most obvious, but not the only answer, is the ontological one. Class actors such as the workers' commissions and the Communist Party of Spain succeeded in being there, which was never an easy thing under a regime which banned all opposition activity; and their success was owing in some measure to their intrinsic (but very different) characteristics.

The workers' commissions were a sui generis form of working-class organization, quite unlike any extant model of such organization in Europe or anywhere else. Originally composed of small groups of self-elected activists, they emerged in response to the immediate and concrete needs of the work force; and for many years maintained an evanescent and almost will-o'-the-wisp existence. They would appear as from nowhere to negotiate a demand or launch a strike, and then disband to avoid reprisals. They were ideologically plural and organizationally fluid, and operated at the grass roots in close correspondence to the patterns of personal networking. As the years passed they developed directly democratic practices in their popular assemblies and achieved greater degrees of coordination at provincial and regional levels; but the defining quality of the movement they led remained unchanged. It was above all *organic*, not 'rational, willed or doctrinaire'.

The Communist Party of Spain, on the other hand, was all of these, and owed its survival to its proven capacity for clandestine organization, before anything else. The Party itself was not very democratic (a point I shall return to) but, on the contrary, was often as nasty and as authoritarian as the regime it was committed to combating. But it did provide a structure for organization and coordination which proved effective in fighting the dictatorship; and, even more important, at many times and in many places it represented the *only political option* for those wishing to oppose Franco. Not all those within the Party, and perhaps not even the majority of them, were 'communist', therefore; and many belonged because of the happy coincidence between the operational exigencies of clandestine politics (and especially the work of recruitment and propaganda), and the tight patterns of personal networks built on the confidence and trust created through struggle. At the same time the pragmatism, even the opportunism of which the Party was often accused, paid democratic dividends, because the Party was politically effective precisely insofar as it learned its strategic lessons from the labour movement. One result of this, which is central to the story, is the interesting paradox of a Communist Party making a critical contribution to the achievement of liberal democracy.

One important caveat is in order. I do not claim that the workers' commissions and the Communist Party were alone in the labour movement (although they were certainly hegemonic within it), nor that the labour movement was alone in the opposition, nor that the opposition was alone in making democracy in Spain. To comment only on the opposition, this undeniably came to contain a wide range of political actors, including students, 'nationalists' in the populous regions of Catalonia and the Basque Country, and even Christian Democrats and socialists in some local contexts. But I will argue that the workers' commissions and the Communist Party spearheaded the democratic struggle, and they were successful in this partly because of their intrinsic characteristics, and partly because of the relationship which evolved between them. The contingencies of this rela-

tionship, which changed with each shift in local context and overall conjuncture, is one of the most fascinating aspects of the struggle (and one that I shall examine in detail). For now, it must be enough to assert that between them Party and commissions not only offered *places* in the struggle for those opposed to Franco, but also opened up *spaces* in civil society where other actors could begin to organize and build a broader-based civic movement. In other words, they were not only the first to enter the historical scene in opposition to the regime, but were also the standard bearers of the struggle, around which other opposition organizations could begin to rally.

But the characteristics of these "standard bearers" were not a sufficient historical guarantee for their leading role in the democratic struggle. More important were the origin and social location of the demands they put and the legal-institutional terrain on which they struggled. To talk first of the demands, it is of primary importance that the first signs of struggle in Spain's crushed and constricted civil society were generated around the *wage relation*. In fact, the workplace was where the first spaces for democratic initiatives were created. It was not that the workplace itself fostered different political attitudes or affirmed a different political resolve (except perhaps for visceral rejection of a violent, banal and exploitative regime); but that the workers' commissions first emerged to put the kind of economic or "bread and butter" demands, regarding wages and conditions of work, which could not be successfully negotiated through the regime's official apparatus, the Vertical Syndicate (see Part II). In short, the demands were economic rather than political and in the early years often sought nothing more than the proper application of Francoist legality. But it was these merely economic demands which engendered the first autonomous syndical practices and organizations, in the form of the commissions; and it was these same syndical practices which came to catalyse the democratic process. In short, the commitment of those who first struggled against Franco was not to an 'imagined' liberal democratic polity, which motivated political action because it was 'desirable'; but rather to syndical demands and practices, which, when translated into political goals, or when coming to require certain political conditions, effectively forged key elements of the democratic project.

I do not suggest that democracy is a direct result of capitalist development, industrial development or any other kind of development. Historically, democracy is a much more difficult result, which depends (among other things) on the social and cultural specificities of political organizations, strategies and projects. In other words, economic growth and political practice are different and separate from each other. There is no denying the dynamic process of industrial expansion experienced by Spain over the period, nor the massive social impact of the economic changes this brought about; and it is true that this expansion coincided with the rising trajectory of the workers' commissions. But the commissions emerged before the expansion

began and were first important in traditional sectors of economic activity such as the mines of Asturias and the vineyards of El Marco de Jerez. So the relationship between them, far from easily explaining democratic process, itself has to be explained.

One plausible element of explanation is that the spontaneous and organic syndical practices of the commissions found a sympathetic response amongst the young and fast-growing generation of workers who, as raw recruits to the industrial environment, were not blinkered by the syndical traditions of the thirties. But this connection demonstrates not only that economic expansion was important, but also that ideology was 'unimportant'.[1] On the one hand, it was unimportant because the new generation of activists did not inherit, and the new forms of syndical activity were not shaped by, the ideological traditions of the thirties, whether anarchist or socialist; on the other, it was unimportant because the political goals which determined the content of the democratic project were not formulated *a priori* within any particular doctrinal discourse at all, but grew spontaneously out of the sui generis syndical activity of the labour movement. Hence, the democratic struggle cannot be understood in terms of any democratic idea, or even in terms of the liberal values it came to endorse. The political process of the making of democracy emerged contingently from the syndical practices of the labour movement, and the democratic project was constructed piecemeal from the possibilities and exigencies of the moment.

Fundamental to my approach is that these possibilities and exigencies were always *strategic* and were therefore discovered and calculated on a specific legal and institutional terrain. The high ground of this terrain was occupied by the Vertical Syndicate, the centrepiece of a global corporatist strategy designed to redefine the totality of relations between civil society and the Francoist State. By definition, this terrain was new, as was the generation of workers the Syndicate attempted to organize and control; and the historical combination of workers unencumbered by the doctrinal or organizational traditions of the thirties, on the one hand, and an unprecedented range of institutional and legal constraints and opportunities, on the other, favoured both new forms of organization and new strategies.

The workers' commissions were one such organization, and while it is certain that they were driven by economic demands, they were also shaped in some degree by the representative structure of the Vertical Syndicate. In fact, the commissions began to establish a more permanent presence once

[1] Ideology in the sense of *Weltanschauung* is important to every political process; but the suggestion here is that ideology in the more restricted sense of doctrine, or as a formal expression of a 'utopian' future of any kind, had no important part to play for the greater part of the struggle. However, as argued in Chapter 2, the *Weltanschauung* of the activists of El Marco, referred to in the vernacular of the region as their *forma de ser*, was very important to the personal networks they formed and hence to the incipient political organizations of the opposition in that region.

they began to work within the official syndical apparatus (where there were limited opportunities for representation and even election); but this presence was still illegal, and dangerously so when they had to press their demands through strike action. Herein lay the syndical kernel of what was to become the central political strategy of the commissions (and one they deployed to consistently good effect against the Francoist State), which was the combination of legal and extralegal struggle. The commissions' leaders, who met illegally to launch the strike, also met as the workers' legal representatives within the Syndicate in order to voice their demands; so far from infiltrating the Syndicate in order to subvert it, they did so in order to use its resources (and the political spaces it provided) to extend and reinforce their own organization. This strategy of staying both *inside* and *outside* simultaneously (of combining legal and extralegal struggle) was clearly discovered in the process of pressing economic demands on the specific institutional terrain of the Syndicate; and this demonstrates that the strategic discoveries which most advanced the democratic cause were themselves conditioned by the concerted State strategy for controlling civil society and especially the working class.

By now it is no longer difficult to explain the leading role of class organizations in the popular-democratic struggle. In the first place, it was syndical activity which came to define the political demands and discover the political strategies which structured the democratic project. These demands and strategies may have been formulated and disseminated by the Communist Party, but they were learned from the workers' commissions; and where the Party deviated from the organic strategic range of the commissions, as in its repeated calls for a 'peaceful national strike', it met with conspicuous failure. In the second place, the labour movement was predominant in the struggle for democracy because of Franco's global corporatist strategy for controlling civil society, and because the legal-institutional terrain where the struggle had to be conducted found its fullest institutional expression in the form of the Syndicate. On both counts it appears clear that not only the role of class organizations in the democratic struggle but also the construction of the democratic project itself (and especially the evolution of the strategies which structured it), were outcomes of a highly *contingent* political process.

CONTINGENCIES AND CHOICES IN THE MAKING OF DEMOCRACY

These contingencies in the political process of the making of democracy in Spain pervade all aspects of this process: the coincidence of personal networks with the exigencies of particular forms of syndical and political organization; the relationship between the workers' commissions and the Communist Party; the contribution of repression and the circumstances of

clandestine struggle to the conversion of economic demands into political goals; the role of class organizations in the democratic struggle; and the democratic 'effects' and gains of broad-based syndical and popular struggles against the political economy of Francoism. They are therefore germane to the development of my argument, and the empirical analysis is recurrently directed to elicit and elucidate the nature of these contingencies. The success of these efforts readers will judge for themselves; but the analytical results both for the actors and for the story are deserving of emphasis now. On the one hand, it was not the democratic credentials or motivations of either activists or organized political actors which finally made the struggle democratic (although there is no need to assert that democratic values or intentions were irrelevant to the struggle, because they were not). So it does not matter if the 'people' who struggled for democracy did not always see their struggle as democratic. On the other, there is no easy way to extrapolate general lessons for democratic struggle from the Spanish experience. The only way to do so, it seems to me, is first to theorize the contingent process of political organization and strategic discovery as it advances piecemeal in civil society, and this I attempt in my final chapter. Chapter 15 should therefore be read not as a contribution to the debate on democratic *transition* (which it is not), but as an attempt to theorize democratic *transformation.*

The contingent outcomes of this process of transformation contributed to make the struggle for democracy in Spain doubly paradoxical, insofar as a large number of its activists were organized within both the rigidly authoritarian Communist Party and the apparatuses of the repressively authoritarian Francoist State. But neither half of the paradox posed any kind of obstacle to democratic advance. The strategic line and political practice of the Communist Party continued to be conditioned by the syndical activities of the workers' commissions; while the Vertical Syndicate provided not only political spaces but also political incentives to the commissions to organize, and later to create, traditions of direct democracy within the assemblies and of effectively free (if still illegal) collective bargaining. In effect, the paradoxical content of the struggle reveals that this was not a 'war of manoeuvre' (in Gramsci's taxonomy), but rather a 'war of position', which was consistently characterized by the interpenetration and mutual permeation of the contending forces. In particular, the process of infiltration of the Vertical Syndicate occupied exactly the same legal and institutional space as the key element of co-optation within Franco's corporatist strategy; and this will be analysed as but one aspect of the more general ambivalence of democratic struggle.

Underlying and often underpinning the new organizations and new strategies emerging from Spanish civil society were the personal networks which channelled the people's first political choices and sustained their political commitment thereafter. Even the central strategy of combining legal and extralegal struggle would not have been operationally viable, in this context

of co-optation and repression, were it not for the personal networks which reproduced the confidence and discipline required to bind together the separate 'operational fields' of the strategy. So not only did the personal networks precede the syndical and political organizations and strategies (even if the growth of these same organizations also helped to extend the networks), but they also contributed to their resilience and reproduction in the difficult circumstances created by a cunning and sometimes ruthless regime. In this sense the participation of the 'people' in the political activities and democratic thrust of Spanish civil society was not ultimately achieved either by syndical or political organization (in commissions or Communist Party), or by political discourse of a doctrinal kind, but by a complex process of personal networking which proved to have a highly flexible organizational and strategic potential, and which gave a new political generation the sinew to stand on its own two feet.

Personal networks remain at the centre of my analysis, then, because they *are* the grass roots of the whole process of the making of democracy in Spain. This was not something I knew before I began the study, and so it stands as one of its main findings. It is also one way of operationalizing the participation of the 'people' in the making of democracy and so allows me to talk of individual activists in a way which supersedes their individuality and affirms their activity. In the social sciences this problem is usually referred to as that of human agency, and, as just suggested, in the final chapter I try to theorize the role of such networks in the individual achievement of political subjectivity and the creation of knowledge. To do so I make free, if not cavalier, use of metaphors from Michel Foucault. But readers should be advised that mine is a very optimistic and democratic reading of Foucault; and if he is mainly concerned with the way that political power is reproduced through the social construction of individuality, I am mainly concerned with how the balance of forces within civil society is changed democratically through a collective achievement of citizenship. This no doubt reflects my wish to return the making of democracy to the 'people' who made it; and if this story has any kind of political and philosophical message it is simply that 'we always have a choice'. Historically, this choice is much more open at some moments than at others, and sometimes is difficult to discern at all; but it can always be created through sacrifice and struggle, which is another way of saying that the exercise of such a choice always requires an accumulation of more particular political and strategic options. It is this choice which makes the story of the making of democracy in Spain so very remarkable; and this same choice which makes the effort to understand the story worthwhile.